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DEVELOPMENT AND INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC COOPERATION

Combating aridity, soil erosion, salinity, waterlogging, desertification and the effects of drought in South Asia

Note by the Secretary-General on the implementation of Economic and Social Council resolution 1191/97

1. By its resolution 1991/97 the Economic and Social Council requested the Secretary-General, "in close collaboration with the Executive Director of the United Nations Environment Programme, the Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme and the Secretary-General of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development and other international and national development assistance organizations to undertake a study, within existing resources, to assess the extent of this problem and its effects on the peoples of the region, and to provide a framework for national and international cooperative efforts, through appropriate existing United Nations organizations, donor and international development institutions and national organizations and programmes, to tackle this problem in its physical and human dimension, and to submit the study to the Economic and Social council in 1992".

2. On receiving the information in November 1991 that the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) was to be the lead organization in the implementation of this resolution, the Executive Director of UNEP consulted with the agencies concerned, particularly with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP). All agreed that a serious study of the magnitude envisaged in the

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resolution could not be done within the time framework set by the resolution, especially as the resolution specified "within existing resources" which prohibited the organizations concerned from devoting additional human resources to the study. Consequently, they proposed (and their proposal was endorsed by the Programme Planning Unit of the Economic and Social Council) that UNEP and the other agencies concerned, would jointly prepare an interim report for the Secretary-General to be submitted to the Council at its substantive session in 1992 on the understanding that the full study would be submitted in 1993.

3. The present progress report, therefore, is limsited to informing the Council on the arrangements being made for the preparation of the study and outlining its basic contents.

4. For the purpose of this study, the geographical scope of South Asia was defined as including the following eight countries of the ESCAP region: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka.

5. The draft of the study is being prepared by FAO, mainly through its Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, utilizing its past experience and results of work undertaken in the Region. This draft will then be reviewed, supplemented and ammended in consultation with the cooperating agencies, using their relevant databases, before it is jointly presented, at the beginning of 1993, to the Secretary-General for his consideration and further action. Some additional financial resources needed by FAO to compile the study will be shared by the cooperating agencies.

6. A preliminary examination of available data shows that South Asia includes at least two very different groups of countries. Afghanistan, India, the Islamic Republic of Iran and Pakistan are severely affected by aridity, recurrent droughts and desertification at least in a major part of their territories. Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and Sri Lanka are situated for the most part in more humid climates, but they, too, have serious but physically different dominant land degradation problems, including nutrient depletion and loss of watershed values. All eight countries have extensive fragile mountainous ecosystems within their territories, but in Bhutan and Nepal these ecosystems dominate the landscape and bring certain specificity to the land problems of the two states.

7. A common feature for all eight countries is intensive vegetation and soil degradation and a corresponding loss of potential biological productivity. This takes place against the background of a fast-growing population and rather limited land resources (over 90 per cent of cultivable land in Asia is already cultivated or has been cultivated and lost in the past - much more than in any other continent, including densely populated parts of Europe). This common feature is reflected in similar socio-economic problems experienced by the States of the subregion, including severe poverty and civil strife.

8. The United Nations agencies and bodies that are responsible for sectoral databases, plans of action and development assistance programmes have for some time been aware of this grave situation in the South Asian subregion. Certain data have already been collected and some plans of action and programmes were prepared and have become operational both at national and regional (ESCAP) levels, with substantial involvement of different United Nations bodies such as FAO, UNEP, UNDP and the World Bank. However, a comprehensive picture of the situation and related activities in the subregion, as requested by the Council, is not yet available. It will, however, be presented in the Secretary-General's report that is planned for next year.

9. The actual status of natural resources, particularly soil, water and vegetation, will be assessed on the basis of data that are available at a global scale: e.g., FAO/Unesco Soil Map of the World; World Map of Human Induced Soil Degradation, published in 1991 by UNEP/ISRIC; the report of the Executive Director of UNEP on the Global Status of Desertification (October 1991); the results of FAO's studies on agro-ecological zones, population pressure and soil degradation; global and regional databases of ESCAP, FAO, UNEP, the World Health Organization (WHO), the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and other competent institutions. These and other published or official materials will be utilized in the report and supplemented by data obtained within the countries concerned. The relevant data of such international development assistance institutions as the World Bank, will also be utilized.

10. There will be some difficulty in presenting the physical aspects of the problem in the report to the Council, e.g. precise, reliable and compatible subregional data on the present status of soil erosion, or waterlogging and salinization. The major problem will be in collecting and quantifying the available social and economic data, particularly concerning the effects on the peoples of the subregion, in strictly economic terms. Since the existing country statistics are highly aggregated in many cases, it would be necessary to examine research publications and files to obtain supplementary information, such as in case-study form.

11. A framework for national and international efforts to address the problems in the subregion must of necessity taken into account all relevant plans of action and programmes, both national and international (e.g. the Indian Programme of Recultivation and Use of Wastelands; the AGENDA 21 Plan of Action of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development; the United Nations Plan of Action to Combat Desertication; the Tropical Forestry Action Programme; the Regional Strategies for Arresting Land Degradation in Asia and the Pacific of FAO and other instruments. All of this information needs to be complied, collated, analysed and supplemented if the study requested by the Council is to be carried out in a serious manner. No such study could have been finalized within the short time-frame originally envisaged.